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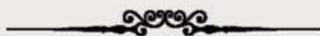
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TRANSPARENCY: A MECHANISM TO REDUCE SOCIAL UNREST



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Dear Readers:

On October 1, 2009, China celebrated the 60-year anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic with a massive parade intended to showcase the country's military might, social stability, political unity and ethnic harmony. However, manifestations of social unrest have continued to hinder Chinese leaders in their efforts to project this image of a stable and unified society. Protests and riots highlight the public's frustration with official corruption, social injustice, and economic inequality in certain sectors of society. Massive riots in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, coming only a year after similar riots in Tibet, have diminished the image of harmonious coexistence between the Han and ethnic minority populations. Although the government response to these "mass incidents" has typically been to focus on the manifestations rather than the causes, central and local governments have begun to identify more holistic measures geared toward crisis prevention rather than crisis management. Such endeavors have been particularly evident in the efforts of the central and local governments to promote greater governmental transparency and openness with the media and its citizens.

In this quarter's *China Elections and Governance Review*, contributing authors Jennifer Grace Smith, Jason Kyriakides, Charlotte Milner-Barry, and Justine Zheng Ren explore impetuses for social unrest in China and the ways in which increased government openness, between the government and the people, in intra-governmental relations, and with the media can work to prevent outbreaks of social violence and strengthen China's international image. CEG editors have also included an article that is representative of many discussions taking place within China regarding solutions to social unrest. The article, written by Dr. Yu Liu of the University of Cambridge and translated by Kai Zhou, suggests civil society mechanisms to resolve social tensions before they manifest in violence.

We welcome feedback, comments, and concerns to this edition and look forward to contributions to our next quarterly installment of the *China Elections and Governance Review*, which will focus on the reform of China's public health policy. Please send comments, concerns, and future contributions to cc.chinascope@gmail.com.

Government Openness: a Cure for Social Unrest?

By Jennifer Grace Smith



When China's State Council passed the "Open Government Information (OGI) Regulations" on January 17, 2007,¹ mandating the establishment of channels through which "citizens, legal persons, and other organizations" could legally obtain government information, many China observers doubted the sincerity of the Chinese government in enacting such legislation. Critics cited the government's track record with press control and tight grip on information as evidence that the OGI regulations were merely for show and would not lead to the creation of mechanisms that would enable the Chinese public to access and request government information.

However, when one considers Chinese leaders' push for transparency within the current socio-political context, the decision to implement OGI regulation, media regulation, and mechanisms to increase citizen engagement in the deliberative

process becomes more understandable. Two factors determine the importance with which government transparency is viewed by the leadership. Firstly, the information disconnect between central and local governmental organs has resulted in an inability on the part of the central government to curb corruption at the local level, leading to a deep distrust and anger toward local governments among the populace. Secondly, the technological advance and globalization of the mass media make it increasingly difficult for governments to prevent conversation on major issues. These two factors create a situation that is highly conducive to social unrest, which has manifested in China with a dramatic increase in mass incidents in the last fifteen years. This paper argues that legislation and the creation of mechanisms that enhance administrative transparency are seen by Chinese leaders as vital to curbing corruption and increasing trust between the government and public, the-

reby quelling social unrest and avoiding damage to regime legitimacy.

Transparency and authoritarian regimes

If one were to attempt to fit the Chinese government's increasing willingness to implement tools for greater government transparency into a generalized theoretical framework of authoritarian regimes and their information-sharing practices, one would be unlikely to understand the government's motivations. Authoritarian regimes are not known for freely disseminating information concerning government activities, budget and financial information, as complete control of information is how such regimes stay in power. Geoffrey Herrera notes that authoritarian regimes "that depend on direct and indirect political repression to stay in power also rely on control over the flow of information. They manage outright or manage through official and unofficial censorship the print, media, television, and even film and popular culture, generally."² By assiduously guarding information regarding its own activities and projecting the state's overarching narratives without allowing any competing information to enter the public consciousness, the government is able to "stifle dissent, inhibit opposition organization, and prevent news from the outside that might undermine the regime from circulating within its society."³ When rival

narratives and interpretations of events are accepted and allowed public voice, the regime risks inviting widespread criticism of policies and practices and allowing movements that challenge the regime's authority to gain traction.

Transparency and the central-local information disconnect

However, interpreting current reforms through this narrow theoretical lens leads one to overlook other impetuses behind the government's efforts at transparency. Specifically, in enacting these reforms, leaders seek to increase transparency not only between government and society, but also between central and local governments, in order to combat corruption at the local level.

Although western media often portrays the Chinese central leadership as monolithic and possessing tight control of its periphery, in reality, the complicated structure of central-local government relations, the increasing control of local governments over the economic affairs of individual enterprises, and the communication difficulties between different governmental organs make such central control impossible. Zheng Yongnian of the University of Nottingham has noted the increasing power of local governments vis a vis individual enterprise:

Intergovernmental decentralisation has characterised China's reforms. The central

Leaders seek to increase transparency not only between government and society, but also between central and local governments.

government decentralised economic decision-making authority to local governments. Even though the reformist leadership has aimed to give individual enterprises more authority over economic decision-making, governments at different levels have not withdrawn from individual enterprises completely. Instead of privatisation, intergovernmental economic decentralisation delegated property rights to local governments rather than to individual enterprises. Local governments became *de facto* owners of state enterprises. Therefore, with the central government gradually withdrawing from the economic affairs of individual enterprises, local governments became highly interventionist.⁴

The process of decentralization in itself is often enough to provide ample opportunity for corruption. In an article titled "A Comparative Analysis of African and East Asian Corruption", Alice Singzingre, referring to states experimenting with democratic reforms, observes that "decentralized decision making coupled with weak institutions may lower entry costs that had limited the ability to impose bribes, this leading to more corruption."⁵

However, in the case of China, the center's relative lack of control over the periphery is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, according to a report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, "High levels of corruption are not unique to the post-1978 reform period. Corrup-

tion was widespread during China's imperial period and exploded during the later nationalist period. The Party launched anti-corruption drives in 1951-52 and again in 1963-65...In this light, reforms in the 1980s did not necessarily produce a surge in corruption but rather allowed for it to return to earlier levels."⁶ Andrew Wedeman, recognizing that "Even in the best of times, the leadership in the capital has never truly controlled the localities and local malfeasance has been a consistent theme in Chinese political history,"⁷ provides a good summation by which to understand center-local relations in China and the context within which corruption flourishes. Wedeman argues that persistent corruption and the localities' noncompliance with the center are "not simply a function of dishonesty" on the part of local officials. Rather, Wedeman contends that even when one discounts willful disobedience on the part of local officials, "the nature of the Chinese state is such that incompetence, random chance, and noise" serve to create a "natural state of noncompliance" in which corruption is able to thrive.⁸ Because orders must pass through five levels of government (Center>Province>Municipality>County>Township>Hamlet)⁹ to reach the local level, there is a high likelihood that these factors will manifest.

The process of decentralization in itself is often enough to provide ample opportunity for corruption.

It is this last—“noise”—that is most important to this discussion of breakdowns in communication and lack of transparency in dealings between the center and local governments. Wedeman defines noise as “information that has been distorted in the process of collection and transmission” and argues that this noise “creates additional complications because well-intentioned agents may misunderstand the principal’s orders and do the wrong thing. Noise also makes it difficult for the principal to determine if her orders have been correctly carried out and, if not, whether the failure results from incompetence, bad luck, or willful disobedience.”¹⁰

This ambiguity creates a certain amount of uncertainty for decision makers at the center, leading them to incorrectly label an act of willful disobedience as a product of bad luck or incompetence, to falsely accuse innocent parties, and to eventually become cautious when dealing with local officials. This atmosphere of ambiguity and central government caution “creates conditions in which cadres can take advantage of the center’s uncertainty to engage in willful disobedience” and, moreover, “create a situation in which automatic punishments may prove dysfunctional or impossible.”¹¹

In this environment, which is structurally prone to a high level of noncompliance on the part of local officials and undergoing rapid transitions that blur the economic powers and responsibilities of local gov-

ernments, corruption has become a mounting problem and a constant threat to the regime’s legitimacy. The Peterson study observes that although level of corruption rose dramatically in China during the 1980s and 1990s, it seems to have become more of a persistent threat rather than a mounting crisis in recent years. According to international watchdogs such as Transparency International and the PRS Group, the corruption perception index, which measures experts’ evaluations of corruption in different countries, plateaued for China during the late 1990s

China’s perceived level of corruption is still very high. In 2008, it ranked 72nd out of 180 countries, with an index of 3.6.

and early 2000s. China’s perceived level of corruption is still very high. In 2008, it ranked 72nd out of 180 countries, with an index of 3.6 (0.1 higher than in 2007), with Denmark, New Zealand, and Sweden scoring highest with indices of 9.3.¹²

Corruption and mass incidents

In the same years in which the perception of corruption in China has remained at a high level, the number of what the Chinese government terms “mass incidents,” which encompasses mass protests, demonstrations, strikes, riots, and large outbreaks of violence, has risen sharply. In 2005, China’s Public Security Ministry reported 87,000 mass incidents, which was up 6% over the 2004 figure and up 50% over the 2003 figure.¹³ In an article on People’s Daily Online, Dr. Yu Debao observes that, according to China’s 2005 *So-*

ciety Blue Book, between 1993 and 2003, the number of recorded mass incidents increased from 10,000 to 60,000, and the number of participants increased from 730,000 people to approximately 3,070,000. Yu also suggests that the participants come from diverse backgrounds, have different reasons for their protest, and direct their protests at different targets, depending on the situation.¹⁴ After 2005, the government ceased to issue statistics on mass incidents, making further analysis of trend lines impossible.

A common line of thinking in the West suggests that these incidents are rooted in public dissatisfaction with authoritarian rule and agitation for political reform. Such a reading of the situation would lead observers to believe that the agitators will not be satisfied without regime change. However, evidence suggests that this is not the cause in the overwhelming majority of cases. According to Wang Erping of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Psychology, mass incidents should not be interpreted as attempts to “rebel against or overthrow the government,” but rather as instances of “ordinary Chinese people wanting to put pressure on local governments to solve problems or improve situations.”¹⁵ Wang’s research also reveals that protesting and rioting served as a last resort for most Chinese: “His team’s survey of almost 10,000 ordinary Chinese carried out between 2004 and last year showed that if

...the number of recorded mass incidents increased from 10,000 to 60,000...number of participants increased from 730,000 to 3,070,000

faced with grievances, a majority said they preferred to settle the matter privately or through legal and 'proper' channels, rather than resort to violent means.”¹⁶

Reasons for protest are highly related to social factors and injustices that directly affect protesters’ lives, not least of which is corruption. Yu Debao and fellow social scientist at the China Academy of Social Sciences and expert in rural affairs, Yu Jianrong, agree that participants in mass incidents are motivated by several factors:

First, the gap between rich and poor is widening. The gap includes not only income inequality, but also other factors such as access to education. The mass incidents demonstrate a strong dissatisfaction with these inequalities. Second, bu-

reaucracy and corruption cause tension between cadres and the populace. Some local cadres don't listen to the voice of the masses and demonstrate an indifference to their plight. Little grievances gradually evolve into large ones, which then trigger mass incidents.¹⁷

The perception of local government corruption, along with a large equality gap and the perception that the government is either indifferent to the corrupt actions or is actively involved in covering them up to protect the corrupt at the expense of the victims, inflicts further psychological damage on victims and leads to deep distrust of local officials, the effects of which

could spill over to threaten the legitimacy of officials at the center. However, as corruption and the occurrence of mass incidents are very carefully covered (if they are covered at all) by Chinese traditional media, these factors would not be nearly as potent a challenge to government authority if not for one other, relatively new factor: the rise of new media and the government's resulting loss of control over the narrative.

New media and the loss of the “narrative”

There is no way for the Chinese government to completely control the narrative any longer, as the limited pluralism that existed under the authoritarian state before the introduction of more sophisticated and ever-evolving information technology has been expanded in seemingly uncontrollable ways. The rise of the internet and web 2.0 ensures that local corruption and mass incidents that would have remained local knowledge ten years ago are now blogged about throughout the country and reported on throughout the world. However, in instances of attempted government cover-up, or in which the government offers as explanation only the official party line, which consumers of new media can see does not correspond with evidence from Youtube videos or eye-witness tweets, the government loses even more authority over the interpreta-

There is no way for the Chinese government to completely control the narrative any longer

tion of events, both domestically and internationally. The spring 2008 mass unrest in Tibet, followed by government lockdown of the region and refusal to deviate from the party line, is one example of such a loss of authority.

Moreover, the internet and globalized media assure that information concerning sensitive events will be released to the public, regardless of the accuracy of the information. If the government guards its information when faced with such crises, it risks losing control of the narrative to inaccurate information, rumor, and state-

ments from government rivals eager to fill the information vacuum. The release of sometimes limited information from non-official sources, and without any official story to corroborate or deny, will be much less likely to depict a positive image of the Chinese government, as it will likely come from competing or rival sources. People will thus come to rely more on easier to access unofficial sources and on their own perceptions of the situation. These factors—increased corruption by local government officials that the central government is almost powerless to prevent combined with a lack of institutionalized recourse for victims of corruption and the ability of citizens to discover such abuses with relative ease—decrease public trust in local government and have potential spillover effects to people's trust in the Party.

New tools for government transparency

With these potential threats in mind, and with the central government's difficulty in overseeing and controlling local government abuses, the government has begun to experiment with three tools designed to both better monitor local governments and increase trust between governments and the populace: 1) open government information; 2) press management; 3) inclusion of the public in the deliberative process, through, for example, inviting commentary from the public, organizing community meetings with officials and making hearings open to the public.¹⁸ Different governments and governmental departments have, to varying degrees, worked one or more of these objectives into their approach to government transparency, with certain cities, such as Chongqing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, taking the lead in experimentation.

Open Government Information

Open Government Information (OGI) regulations, which have been passed by the State Council as well as by provincial governments, municipal governments, and government agencies throughout the country (see www.chinatransparency.org), are tools that reflect the government's recognition of the necessity of making government information available to the public and of creating a channel through which the public can request specific government information and thereby become

better participants in the deliberative process. In order to make government information more readily accessible, governments and agencies have created a sophisticated system of online portals on which government information is posted and, in the case of certain cities and provinces, discussed by the public in online forums. Although the Open Government Information regulation that went into effect nationally in 2008 mandates that governments above county level strengthen their work in disclosing government information, it leaves most decisions concerning the drafting and implementation of the regulations to governments at the provincial and municipal level, which has caused considerable variation in the strength and effectiveness of regulations from one locality to another.

The Guangzhou Finance Bureau's decision in late October to make the budget for 114 municipal departments and agencies public online is one example of the benefits to be gained through open information disclosure by a government agency. In the aftermath of the disclosure, media reports that the Public Security Bureau Kindergarten received more government funds than were allocated for bureaus dealing with domestic security and protection, internet investigation and management, and anti-terrorism fueled public outrage, prompting a response in which Guangzhou officials promised that the imbalance would be rectified.¹⁹

Media regulations and press management

Certain cities, such as Chongqing, took an early lead in enacting media regulation to serve as a conflict resolution mechanism. In his analysis of the Chongqing municipal government's response to the 2008 Chongqing taxi driver strike within the context of the city's 2004 "Interim Measures of Chongqing Municipality on Open Government Affairs Information," Steve Hess discusses the government's attempts to manage media relations and provide more resources for the state media:

"The Chinese government has, when faced with serious domestic disturbances, adopted a more open media approach. This stance, first outlined by President Hu Jintao in a June 2008 speech, calls for official state media to seize the initiative by undertaking quick, on-the-spot reporting, allowing for Chinese state media, rather than commercial or foreign media outlets, to "actively set the agenda" and frame the developing story."²⁰

The recently passed "Shenzhen Municipal People's Government Regulations on News Release Work," to go into effect December 1, 2009, is in line with the central government's public relations and message control strategies, calling for the establishment of a press office in the Shenzhen Municipal People's Government, which "shall be responsible for relevant institution building and for promoting, coordinating, guiding, and monitoring news releases."²¹ This willingness on the part of local governments to experiment with different methods of press manage-

ment bodes well for the national implementation of similar measures in the future.

Public engagement in the deliberative process

Different localities are also experimenting with increasing government transparency through including the public in the deliberative process. In his discussion of the Chongqing government's methods of dealing with the striking taxi drivers, Hess describes the way in which the government took the lead not only in managing the press and promoting access to information, but also in dealing with incidents of social unrest in a more open fashion, by engaging openly in deliberations with protesters and airing the deliberations to the public. Hess describes the positive impact this more inclusive deliberative process might have on the resolution of conflicts before they devolve into mass incidents:

"Importantly, the public hearing system applied in this situation moved debates over public concerns from the streets to the boardroom, encouraging the use of formal rather than extra-legal channels for venting public grievances. It may well indicate that public deliberation between aggrieved parties and officials within formal deliberative institutions may become a frequent component of conflict resolution responses at various levels of government and in other areas of the PRC."²²

The successful resolution of this conflict using these more open deliberative me-

thods suggests that inviting the public to engage in the deliberative process, and thereby giving frustrated citizens a channel through which to voice complaints about corruption, injustice, or economic issues, can serve to limit manifestations of social unrest and instill a greater sense of trust and respect between the public and government officials.

The creation of these regulations and mechanisms for increased government transparency could thus succeed in achieving three aims that would serve to quell mass incidents and protect CCP legitimacy: 1) it could give the public a better understanding of actual regulations and laws, making them into better informed citizens and giving local officials less room to take advantage of general ignorance; 2) it could give the public a channel through which to seek some means of recourse, so that people don't see violent protest as its only means of rectifying problems; 3) it could instill in public officials the sense that there is some measure of oversight over their decisions; 4) it could give the central authority a channel through which to hear about local abuses of power and either deal with them before they become an issue or deal with or curtail any public backlash that might occur as a result.

Conclusion

The central government's inability to curb corruption at the local level, combined with the general public's growing awareness of the details of corrupt activities due to its access to new media tools, have led

to an increasingly precarious situation for government legitimacy and social stability. As a means to promote better governance and generate greater trust in local governments, governments have implemented regulations promoting the public's access to information and stronger government-media relations and have adopted measures to encourage public engagement in the deliberative process.

Although these measures are a positive sign of the government's growing awareness of the importance of openness to the public, advocates of government transparency have concerns regarding both the government's reasons for implementing the measures and the implementation process itself. Such concerns include:

- 1) The new regulations on press management, such as those recently passed by Shenzhen's municipal government, do not necessarily bode well for greater press freedoms. On the contrary, as noted by David Burdanski of China Media Project at the University of Hong Kong, the government's new interest in working closely with the press and involving itself in "press release work" suggests that the government wants to have a greater influence over the press narrative.²³
- 2) The 2008 OGI regulations leave much leeway in the implementation process to the local level. While this gives regions the ability to implement the regulations in the context of their own histories, issues and concerns, it also means that some localities will adopt

very forward-thinking measures, but other governments will not attempt to implement the measures in any serious way.

- 3) Although the government has established a sophisticated system of channels through which to disseminate government information to the public, the government has been less responsive to the public's requests for access to specific government information and in creating a channel for two-way dialogue between government officials and the public.²⁴

In spite of these concerns, if the current steps toward government transparency succeed in creating a culture of increased openness and trust between the public and government, the government should become more willing to strengthen legislation to strengthen bidirectional channels of communication in order to root out corruption and resolve social issues before they develop into demonstrations of social unrest.



Notes

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7. Andrew Wedeman, "Incompetence, Noise, and Fear in Central-Local Relations in China," *Studies in International Development*. Winter 2001, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 59.
8. Ibid
9. Ibid, p. 80.
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12. The corruption perception index is a composite index that draws on four-

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<http://cmp.hku.hk/2009/09/21/1816/>>.
 24. Jim Fisher-Thompson, "New Chinese Information Regulation Off to Good Start, Experts Say," America.gov, June 24, 2009. <<http://www.america.gov/st/democracyhr-english/2009/June/200906241656481ejrehsif0.7543299.html>>.



What is “Mass Incident”?

The Categorization and Deconstruction of a Dangerous Concept

By Justine Zheng Ren



Whether the Chinese government is prepared to accept it or not, mass incidents (the official term for manifestations of civil unrest in China) have proved to be an inescapable social and political phenomenon. After a long period of economic boom with little investment in institutional change, the current conflict resolution mechanisms are no longer capable of sustaining the changing social structure and political relationships in contemporary China. This is not to say that the Chinese ruling party will crack down on the imminent challenges it faces, because none of the indicators of a revolution have been present thus far. However, the way in which the Chinese government deals with these so-called “mass incidents” will determine the future of the country and the fate of the regime. It is particularly important to disentangle the totalistic concept of the mass incident and introduce differentiating mechanisms to resolve social

conflicts represented in the phenomenon of civil unrest. This paper attempts to deconstruct the mass incident phenomenon, discusses current measures designed to prevent the occurrence of mass incidents, and makes suggestions for more impactful preventative strategies.

Statistics on Mass Incidents

Yu Jianrong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), indicates that the number of mass incidents was decupled from 8,709 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005, among which 80% of the events were defined by Yu as rights activism while only 5.1% were influential riots. A further decomposition shows that mass incidents staged respectively by farmers, workers and urbanites take up 35%, 36% and 15% of rights movements.¹ In a collaborative paper, three scholars from Tsinghua University show that the growth of mass incidents soared from an annual average rate of increase of 10% between

1995 and 1996 to an incredible rate of 25.5% during the period from 1997 to 2004, with the number of participants dramatically climbing from around 730,000 to 3.76 million.² From the above data, it is obvious that riots only occupy a small portion of mass incidents. The fundamental reason for the proliferation of mass incidents is the frequent encroachment on the interests of the middle and lower classes, coupled with a lack of appropriate and effective conflict-resolving mechanisms.

It also remains rather problematic to equate a riot with a political attack on the regime; it is more helpful to understand riots as responses to the decreasing credibility of local government, due to lack of government transparency, cadre corruption, and social decay, a mixture that can easily cause accidents to turn into social disruption. Therefore, riots can be better understood as signals released by the society instead of a symptom of disorder and uprising. Riots are merely an extreme way to attract the central government's concern as well as to vent collective grievances.

Mass Online Incidents

Mass incidents have also become a means of expression online. With the number of Chinese netizens surpassing 300 million, China has become number one in the world in its population of internet users. The Internet has opened new opportunities for freedom of speech alongside the authority-censored traditional media. Moreover, the horizontal structure embo-

died in the Internet of communication and information transmission is overturning the rigid hierarchical arrangements in the conventional arena for political expression, which theoretically endows every participant with equal status in the construction of this new political field.

The “mass online incident” has thus arrived on the stage of contemporary Chinese politics, becoming a third type of “mass incident.” From the initial online anti-corruption campaigns, the human flesh searches, to the online outpouring of support of a waitress who stabbed to death the officials who had sexually assaulted her (the case of *Deng Yujiao*), the development of public space in the virtual world has succeeded to mobilize civil society. This type of mass incident, which displays characteristics that distinguish it from rights movements and incidental riots, opens a new page in the contemporary history of civil society development in China for its pursuit of public, rather than private, interests.

The Upsurge of Rights Movements

The vast majority of mass incidents have a clear objective – to defend or restore citizen rights encroached upon by the authority or the market. Termed “responsive” collective action by Charles Tilly, they are a normal social response to the infringement of rights to which there is no effective remedy. Due to the immense disparity in the capacities for resource mobilization between those in authority and citizens, the two parties involved in a responsive collective action can hardly compete in a

fair sense. This means that the escalation and diversification of collective actions are to some extent ineluctable unless institutional set-ups can be reshaped in a way to favor the disadvantaged group and restrict rent seeking and official dissipation.

The rights movements in contemporary China can be divided into three major categories, each defined by its distinctive group of participants. First, rights movements staged by farmers: Chen Xiwen, the Director of the Central Government Working Group on Rural Affairs, concludes in a briefing meeting in 2009 that mass incidents staged by farmers focus on four concrete issues: (1) land expropriation; (2) environmental pollution; (3) enforced migration; (4) disposition of collective property.³

Second, labor movements: This type of social disruption can be further classified into three sub-groups according to their specific trajectory of group formation. In this regard, the study of Ching Kwan Lee, professor of sociology at UCLA, is particularly illuminating. Lee identifies three transformation modes of the working class: the formation of migrant rural labor, the reshaping of socialist workers, and the unmaking of the laid-off workers.⁴ Obviously, different characteristics and a myriad of tensions, brought into the transformation process by different sub-groups of the working class, will lead to diverse manifestations of mass inci-

The rights movements in contemporary China can be divided into three major categories, each defined by its distinctive group of participants.

dents. As Lee finds, workers in the “rust-belt” of socialist-heavy industries take part more often in street protests and public disruption. These workers are experts in venting their grievances in the language of social contract and their desperation mainly comes from downward social mobility and the sense of having been betrayed and deserted during the process of reform. In contrast, in export-oriented industries along the southeastern coast, workers are more likely to resort first to labor arbitration and litigation in order to get back their entitled payments. Unlike the rust-belt workers, the resentment accumulated among migrant rural laborers is triggered by exploitation and discrimination.⁵

The third category of rights movements involves urbanites. These movements are usually elicited by housing demolition and resident relocation, land acquisition and expropriation, and rights disputes between housing owners and developers (who are supported by local government). A striking characteristic of urbanites’ rights movements is that the social status of these rights activists is generally higher than that of the conventional disgruntled groups. The urbanites make up the well-educated, young middle-class. They have decent job prospects, assured revenue, knowledge of legal affairs, and Internet literacy. Interestingly, it is through the process of carrying out rights movements that this self-esteemed and socially res-

pected group loses its psychological supremacy and sees clearly its disadvantaged social status trapped within the current institutional arrangements.⁶

The Outburst of Riot-type Incidents

Yu Jianrong incisively terms riots as “anger-venting events.” The direct cause of these incidents can be a timely instigating event or the escalation of rights activism. Riots are characterized by Yu Jianrong as “having no obvious organizers to negotiate, the vast majority of participants hav-

ing no stake in the event, just attempting to appeal for justice or venting their discontent with social injustice.” It is in the manifestation of these events that there are “activities of beating, smashing, looting, and burning that target at government agencies and other facilities.”⁷

The direct cause of these incidents can be a timely instigating event or the escalation of rights activism.

Without doubt, such “resentment” and “discontent” play a large role in the occurrence and evolution of riot-type incidents, as the powerful thrust of emotional grievances has already been proved in the working class formation and labor movements in contemporary South Korea.⁸ However, emotion per se is not enough to account for extreme activism unless the environment works to nurture, sustain and ignite that sentiment. The fundamental cause of riot-type incidents is not only the diminishing credibility of authority and crisis of governance, but also the multiple devastating factors leading to social decay.

Social decay, as Sun Liping, professor of sociology at Tsinghua University states, distinguishes itself markedly from social turmoil.⁹ The self-organized collective action of local people to appeal grievances and vent injustice can hardly be called “riots” if there is no occurrence of violent action, such as beating, smashing, looting or burning. This collective action is rather a spontaneous reaction to social decay in defense of the society as a whole.

In addition, the self-organized collective appeal can also provide an opportunity for the government to react appropriately, thereby enhancing its credibility, improving the micro-institutional environment, advancing healthy social development, and avoiding the occurrence of riots. To seize such an opportunity, the on-spot response of the local government plays a vital role in determining the developmental trajectory of these events. Unfortunately, the handling of many cases only serves to heighten further the tension between society and the government, transforming citizens’ defense of society into riots, resulting in harsh suppression of these forces and public silence.

The Polymorphism of Mass Online Incidents

It is estimated that by June 2008, the number of China’s netizens exceeded that of the United States, with an online population of 253 million, among which 81.5% of users (206 million) regularly acquired news online and 42.3% (107 million) had set up personal blogs/spaces.¹⁰ Consequently, a new term, “mass online inci-

dent,” was created to describe an attendant social and political phenomenon. With the rapid growth of netizens, and due to strict censorship of the traditional media, the Internet has become the main avenue for Chinese citizens to express their concerns for public interests. This intangible force has successfully evolved into an interventionist power— influencing policy making by serving as a significant indicator of public opinion and fostering multi-regional, multi-group civil activities.¹¹

The myriad causes of mass online incidents make categorization almost impossible. They range from public challenges to the faked discovery of a rare species by local authorities to bursts of anger at the abnormal deaths of citizen detainees; from spontaneous mobilization for earthquake relief to national support for a waitress who stabbed to death the official who had sexually assaulted her. However, the different appeals, carried out in uniform mode of representation, shed light on two key points: (1) The rise in mass online incidents signals that civil activism in contemporary China has expanded from the field of rights movements to the stage of expression for multiple public interests. (2) The uniform representation of these events is an unbalanced outcome due to the hard and fast control on traditional media and the vibrancy of relatively free new media. This dual character of mass online incidents prefigures a “war of movement” for freedom of speech and for autonomy in organized civil action.

It is predictable that the authority will invest substantial resources to reverse these trends, but the intensive interaction between netizens and the government in the struggle for liberating and controlling the virtual space will by itself accelerate the resurrection of civil rights awareness among the large population of Chinese netizens. The spontaneous nation-wide boycott in the summer of 2009 against the enforced installation of Green Dam Youth Escort, an anti-spy software that allegedly aimed to restrict access to pornography but actually targeted politically sensitive websites, has already stimulated hundreds of thousands of netizens to join in the defense of freedom in the virtual world. This defense, alongside other governmental considerations, resulted in the temporary retreat of the Ministry of Information in its plans to implement Green Dam.¹²

In fact, the definitions of the words “mass” and “incident” remain themselves quite ambiguous.

What is “Mass Incident”?

From the above analysis of the three types of “mass incident,” it is not difficult to conclude that mass incidents share few commonalities in terms of characteristics, objectives, and forms of representation. In fact, the definitions of the words “mass” and “incident” remain themselves quite ambiguous. From a perspective of political functionalism, the only potential benefit of using such ambiguous terminology is to avoid the introduction of vocabulary— such as “rights movements,” “anger vent-

ing,” and “expression of public interests” —into the mainstream media. The question is whether this filtering actually works. It all depends on whether the elimination of such words is possible in the vast spectrum of public discourse. However, the danger of such purposeful ambiguity is apparent—it blurs the boundaries within the term “mass incident” and blends different objectives and causes under an overarching structure. Consequently, this will lead parties involved in conflict resolution to favor a dangerously simplistic and mechanistic view in handling the so-called “mass incidents.”

If one were to input two terms in Chinese, “mass incident” (*quntixing shijian*) and “prevention measures” (*yu'an*), into the search engine Google, one would find more than 280,000 search results. Governments at all administrative levels—provincial, municipal, county, township, and even village—have formulated specific prevention measures for the potential outbreak of mass incidents. Many government agencies and publically-funded organizations have also adopted similar rules and regulations – including the bureau of intellectual property, organization for vocational training, and even kindergartens. Most of the measures only stress tactics to prevent the “masses” from attacking government agencies, organizing collective petitions, setting up road blocks, and intercepting the cadres’ sedans, and make no mention of solutions to the substantial problems hidden behind these bursts of unrest. The key mechanism of such preventative measures is to link the

number of mass incidents to the performance of local cadres, and to ready resources (material, manpower, information, violence) for use in repressing the incident. The core resource, by far, is the deployment of police and the armed police force (including all equipment, vehicles and weapons).

These plans may lead to a transient period of calm, at least on a superficial level, but the potential obstacles for the Chinese government in achieving long-term satisfaction are obvious: (1) By applying more pressure on local cadres’ to perform in a certain way in handling mass incidents, but failing to implement corresponding micro-institutional changes, how can local cadres be expected not to abuse their coercive power in order to quell dissent and secure their positions? (2) How can a complicated social and political phenomenon arising from structural disruption, dubbed “mass incident,” be prevented and repressed, while the definition of the phenomenon remains so ambiguous? Both of these questions must be answered directly if these measures are to have any hope of succeeding.

Notes

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China's Mass Incidents: a Study of Recent Cases

By Jason Kyriakides



In 2008 and 2009, several protests occurred throughout China with participants numbering in the tens of thousands. These “mass incidents” occurred in large part as a public response to social and political problems, such as official corruption, industrial pollution, murder and ethnic violence, which the Chinese government failed to address effectively. As the Communist Party’s legitimacy confronts ongoing challenges in today’s China – in which workers are no longer assured the “iron rice bowl” welfare protections of the Communist past, in which local governments are estranged from the center and a large number of local officials engage in corrupt activities that the central government cannot control, and in which ethnic tensions run high – the central government is taking steps to ensure the continuing peaceful development of the country.

In their discussions of plans for “harmonious society,” government officials cite with increasing frequency the need to develop mechanisms geared toward defusing mass anger in response to social ills, be-

fore this anger evolves into violence. Among these mechanisms, open access to information is essential to resolving problems of official corruption, the levying of excessive taxes and fees, election fraud, loss of retirement pensions, and other widespread social problems in contemporary China. Transparent governance, in which citizens can access the legal code and view the lawmaking process, gives citizens the ability to oversee government officials, enabling them to better anticipate future government action, recognize official corruption and abuses of power, and have some political leverage with officials in property, pension or other disputes.

Thus, as protesters continue to press them for change, the central and local governments have yielded substantial legislative and legal progress on several fronts and have made overtures to greater government transparency when dealing with issues of corruption and official abuses of power. This paper seeks to evaluate the government’s policy and rhetorical response to mass incidents in the past year,

which suggest a trend of government transparency. After examining the growth in the number of mass incidents over the past 15 years and discussing the various factors motivating protesters, the author will use three case studies—the June 2008 Guizhou protests, the June 2009 Shishou protests, and the Hunan and Shaanxi anti-pollution protests that occurred in July and August 2009—to evaluate trends in government response regarding transparency and media openness over the course of the last year and a half.

Growth and diversification of mass incidents

The annual number of mass incidents throughout China has steadily increased every year since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms were initiated in 1978. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stopped publishing the number of protests after 2005, in which year there were approximately 87,000 mass incidents, in comparison with only the 8,706 incidents that took place in 1993 (Li and O'Brien 4). According to Hong Kong political magazine *Cheng Ming*, which relies primarily on mainland sources, Party insiders quote the number of mass incidents in 2008 to be as high as 127,000 (*China Labour Bulletin* 7), an increase of almost 46 percent in only three years.

Mass incidents are not only becoming larger and increasingly varied, they are also becoming more organized. According to studies by noted China scholars Kevin O'Brien and Liangjian Li, the fact that mass incidents have increasingly had lead-

ers and structure since the 1990s is one of the main reasons they have been growing in number (Li and O'Brien 5-9). The development of mass protests as a common form of political expression in China is directly connected to growing unrest from deepening economic and political grievances. These grievances generally follow specific patterns by region, as William Hurst demonstrates in his research on workers' politics in multiple parts of China. His work shows that the level and method of resistance in each urban region of China tends to vary by each region's distribution of State Owned Enterprises (SOE), history of industrialization, proximity to city centers, relationship with the central government, and unique regional political economy (96).

For urban Chinese, the primary motivations cited are related to job security, wages and benefits, and relationship to local governments. In industrial northeastern China, millions of workers who were formerly employed by SOEs are now unemployed; unpaid wages from their former employers and the lack of reemployment opportunities become the primary motivations of these workers. The coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Shanghai and Tianjin have weathered the economic reforms well due to their history of market economy and foreign investment; the strong economies in these areas lead workers to demand specific promised but undelivered benefits, such as retirement pensions, rather than means for basic subsistence. Northern Henan, Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces are resource-extractive and

light-industrial economies. As such, workers in these provinces face fewer SOE layoffs. However, these areas often do not get the same level of investment from the central government that other areas do, so protests there involve the lack of benefits offered to disadvantaged workers. Finally, the protests in the upper Changjiang region of Hunan, Hebei, Chongqing and Sichuan provinces feature motivations related to the corruption of officials and enforcement failure of local government (Hurst 99-102).

For rural Chinese, mass incidents are aimed more directly at local governments. Rather than being motivated by lack of means for subsistence or unfulfilled employment promises, rural protest claims tend to focus on excessive fees and taxation, the so-called “*san luan*”; local corruption; excessive force in responding to rural complaints; official refusal to follow election results; and official projects that endanger rural livelihoods by wasting money, affecting public health or forcing farmers to leave their land. An added dimension of complexity outside of major city centers is the absence of the central government and the relative independence of local governments, which often leads rural protestors to demand the intervention of the central government after illegal action by local officials.

Because mass incidents continue to evolve as an increasingly powerful political tactic

in China, and due to new regulations instructing officials on how to respond to such volatile situations, mass incidents are forcing governments at the local, provincial and central levels to produce new legislation and take action. Governments at multiple levels are producing new rules about how to punish officials who abuse their authority or fail to address public resistance effectively. Most significant is the fact that some municipal and local governments are also setting up mechanisms to better gauge public opinion by improving governmental transparency and increasing communication between the government and the public. Examples of

...mass incidents are forcing governments at the local, provincial and central levels to respond with legislation and action.

these steps include new rules on government interviews with the media, regulations on the timeliness of government reports to the public, and allowing public access to budget information. In publishing this sort of

information, local governments in China hope to avoid massive protests resulting from public frustration with certain social conditions and a frequent lack of government responsiveness. The following case studies give examples of these kinds of protests, and describe the impact of each on the central and local governments' approach to governmental transparency.

Case Study 1: Guizhou Protests, June 2008

The riots in Weng'an in June 2008 occurred only weeks before the opening cer-

emony of the Beijing Olympics on August 8. The proximity to the Olympics may have had a role in the way the central government responded to them, which was regarded internationally as taking a marked shift from its typical approach with its introduction of a new approach to media coverage of certain events. On June 22, 2008, the body of a 15-year-old girl named Li Shufen was found in a river in Weng'an County, Guizhou province. According to a police report, Li had committed suicide by drowning herself in the river; however, Li's family and other witnesses said they saw her being led away by two unfamiliar young men and a friend from school, all whom were later shown to be related to top county officials. Autopsies conducted by the county, prefecture and provincial governments all suggested the cause of death to be suicide, but due to the suspicious nature of the circumstances, Li's parents requested another autopsy. When they were denied one, Li's uncle clashed with police and was beaten by unknown men, believed by some to be hired thugs. This was the final straw for the Li family and their supporters. Many Weng'an residents were already frustrated by battles with the local government over problems stemming from slow development of the region – including the relocation of 45,000 residents for new construction, ownership rights to coal and phosphorus mining projects, and the decline of SOE jobs (Luo).

The result was a slow build from two students holding a white banner in protest to a mass riot of over 30,000 people, who set

fire to more than 150 government offices and 40 police vehicles over the course of seven hours (Chan). In response, 1,500 military police from the nearby capitol of Guiyang cordoned off the area and arrested 200 to 300 rioters (Lantler). Guizhou police attempted to pass the riots off as incited by local gangs, stating that 39 of the 200-300 arrested were gang members, and that “gang members and unlawful elements,” rather than ordinary citizens angry about government inaction, had caused the protests.

Though six rioters were imprisoned, the heads of both government and the Party in Weng'an were fired. The head of the provincial government, Shi Zongyuan, also made a public statement condemning the Weng'an county government for failing to deal with crime, corruption, and the equitable handling of resource rights. The state-run newspaper *Xinhua* also broke from tradition by reporting on the incident the same day, rather than waiting until its conclusion to break “news” (Elegant).

The way in which Party leaders dealt with the Weng'an riots suggests a changing attitude toward government openness with the media. In a politically-loaded speech by President Hu Jintao, Hu suggested that the Party was planning a new course for media coverage that would both increase the range of its control and increase news coverage. According to a translation by the *China Media Project*, Hu said this would be done by

“...adhering to people-based [journalism] (以人为本), increasing the affinity (亲和力), attractiveness (吸引力) and appeal (感染力) of news reports...new news work must...accommodate new changes to the situation in and outside China, keep in tune with the new expectations of the people and doing our work well with a spirit of reform and renewal”. (Bandurski, “Propaganda Leaders”)

This language suggests that despite continuing its longtime media tactic of censoring content that goes against the Party line, the Party was looking for new ways to “guide public opinion” and to make the center more trusted in the wake of the Weng’an incident. Hu’s speech made journalists both wary and hopeful. Some interpreted it as an announcement of greater government intervention in the media, with a new government strategy of proffering a “first response” to news stories, ahead of any possible dissenting voices. Others interpreted the speech as pushing for a relaxation of censorship and coverage restrictions. While it is difficult to gather much from the vague language about “keeping in tune with the new expectations of the people,” Hu’s emphasis on the need to cater to the people’s need for information suggests that the government is willing to take a more open stance with the media, at least to a certain degree.

Case Study 2: Shishou Protests, June 2009

Almost one year after the riots in Weng’an, a wave of protests took place in Shishou

in response to another mysterious death, with similarly significant effects on media coverage and government response to mass incidents. This time, however, the central government’s reaction to the protests reversed the forward trend in government transparency during mass incidents, prompting critical words from even state news sources.

On June 17, 2009, the body of a chef for the government-run Yonglong Hotel in Shishou, Hubei Province, fell from the building’s upper floors to the sidewalk below. The man was Tu Yuangao, a 24-year-old new hire who had been working at the hotel for four months. Tu’s parents were told that Tu had committed suicide and left behind a suicide note. The circumstances were suspicious, however – Tu had spoken with his parents just before his death, and they were unaware of any suicidal plans or feelings. Furthermore, there were no bloodstains where Tu fell, but his body was covered in bruises that suggested he had been beaten before falling (Ouyang).

Tu’s parents were told that Tu had committed suicide and left behind a suicide note.

The day after Tu’s death, the hotel offered his family a deal: if they would agree to label the death a suicide and keep quiet about it, they would receive 35,000 yuan for burial costs. The family refused and stayed with the body to protect it from being taken away. Two thousand residents of Shishou joined them in blocking

the doors. On June 19, the first confrontations between police and residents broke out, as police and funeral vehicles arrived to try to take the body away. The citizens overturned police cars, and the police were forced to retreat. The crowd grew in size and intensity, reaching 40,000 at its peak and pelting the police with bottles and bricks (Lam). The next day, military police were sent in from the capital of Hubei, and the rioters dispersed. According to a resident interviewed by *Reuters* journalists, the residents of Shishou were told first that the police were conducting “fire prevention training” (when in fact the fire hoses were being used on the protestors) and later that the protestors were “gangsters” or members of the Falun Gong, a religious organization that the state considers dangerous (Hornby).

This blunt labeling of the protestors as enemies of the state was the first indication that this event would set back the government’s progress in dealing with mass incidents and public opinion. The Hong Kong-based China Media Project suggested the handling of the Shishou incident may have signaled the retraction of Hu’s post-Weng’an policy of making media “keep in tune with the expectations of the people,” and a return to media “guidance of public opinion.” The evidence was in a June 24 editorial on the Shishou incident by the Party-controlled *People’s Daily*, which slipped in a surprisingly sharp criticism of

Faced with sudden-breaking issues, it is not sufficient for the government and mainstream media to release information.

the government’s handling of news releases on Shishou:

As in the case of Weng’an, the Shishou mass incident originated with a death under suspicious circumstances, in which the explanation provided by police did not satisfy the family members of the victim and the general public...The problem was that the authorities did not work fast or effective enough in getting out “the government’s point of view.” Meanwhile, posts in Internet forums multiplied.

Faced with sudden-breaking issues, it is not sufficient for the government and mainstream [official] media to release information. They must also move quickly to understand the pulse of new information emerging on the Internet, reacting quickly to public doubts. This requires that governments, and especially propaganda offices, be equipped with the ability to rapidly and accurately compile and analyze public opinion.

This passage suggests that Hu’s post-Weng’an policy had support among journalists, even in Party-run *People’s Daily*, and that they were genuinely dissatisfied with the loss of their ability to “rapidly and accurately” respond to the news and to the people. The article was later removed from the *People’s Daily* website, but not until after it had been read widely (Bandurski “Shishou Riots”).

In the weeks following the Shishou riots, the Party's Central Committee issued a set of guidelines for local and prefectural governments, entitled "Temporary Regulations Concerning the Implementation of an Accountability System for Senior Cadres of the Party and Government." This document listed seven scenarios in which officials would be punished for "inappropriate handling" of mass incidents.

The punishments for officials who have committed one or more of these errors range from compulsory public apologies to "forced dismissal" from office, without possibility of returning to employment for one year.

This set of rules was a significant step forward for accountability at the higher levels of government, but it has glaring weaknesses. Firstly, the regulations are reactive rather than preventative; they are only enforceable in the event that official negligence, mishandling, abuse of authority or other illegal activity leads to the occurrence of mass incidents. Secondly, the extremely vague wording of the regulations gives a significant amount of interpretative leeway to both citizens and government. Because China does not have a strong private legal culture in many areas, the vagueness of the rules is likely to worsen rather than improve the relationship between citizens and their local or prefectural governments. Still, the fact that such regulations now exist suggests that the central authorities

...the Shishou riots showed that the "lessons" of Weng'an about transparency and openness had not been fully learned.

want to put a legal framework in place in order to hold cadres accountable and sets an important foundation for similar restraints on government to be implemented in the future.

China's journalists suggested the new rules were issued as an emergency fix-it for local governments' continuous failures to meet the demands of citizens before protests formed, especially in the wake of major mass incidents in Weng'an and Shishou involving tens of thousands of protesters. Specifically, the Shishou riots showed that the "lessons" of Weng'an about transparency and openness had not

been fully learned – the local government did not hold a press conference to educate the public about the situation, it did not release accurate information about the problem until after events had taken place, and it did not properly address the legiti-

mate concerns of Mr. Tu's family.

Case Study 3: Hunan & Shaanxi Pollution Protests, July & August 2009

Hunan

Suspicious cover-ups of mysterious deaths were only one of the many catalysts for mass incidents in the past year. Another increasingly common grievance has been growing pollution due to China's rapid development, which increasingly contaminates the air, water and soil for millions of Chinese. The good news is that the gov-

ernment is beginning to publicly admit the pollution problem, and is taking action in a growing number of cases. After a Jiangsu firm known as Biaoxin Chemical Company poisoned a river in the city of Yangcheng in August, the company boss was sentenced to 11 years in prison for criminal negligence, in the first ever sentencing in China for environmental crimes (*Xinhua* “Chemical Company Boss”). But because such examples are still few and far between, government action regarding transparency is still meager, and protests of government inaction on environmental regulation are on the rise.

On July 29 and 30, protests broke out in the farming town of Zhentou, Hunan province, over the pollution of soil and groundwater with heavy metals from the nearby Xianghe Chemical Plant. The plant had been producing polluting materials for several years, but Xianghe had been concealing its produce from the villagers, telling them the factory was manufacturing food additives. When a government team was dispatched to check the health claims of the Zhentou villagers, 509 of them were found to have cadmium poisoning. The government did provide a small compensation for villagers affected by the poisoning. However, for most villagers, the compensation was not nearly enough to cover medical bills. The final straw came one week before the first protest, when a villager died suddenly and was found to have nearly nine times the maximum level of cadmium in his blood (*China Worker* “Pollution Protests”).

The protests featured more than 1,000 villagers (about a third of Zhentou’s population), who approached the government headquarters and police station to demand the full closure of the plant and punishment of its owners, better monetary compensation for their medical bills, and the withdrawal of government health reports that tried to show that the situation “was not serious.” In response, one villager was badly beaten by police and then arrested with five others, igniting a second day of protest (Libcom.org).

The mass incident was successful in achieving protesters’ immediate goals—the Xianghe factory was closed “forever,” the directors were detained and the head of the municipal Environment Protection Bureau fired from his position—but not in repaying farmers for their ruined land and health. Several days later, the deputy mayor of Zhentou was arrested on charges of accepting bribes from the Xianghe executives (*China Worker*). However, this government response, much in line with the accountability regulations passed by the Central Committee following the Shishou incident, was purely reactive in nature, doing little to prevent future crises like the one in Zhentou, making it a good example of a closed-door, top-down response without transparency. Despite having made their demands clear to officials, the citizens of Zhentou were not allowed to participate in the process to fix their situation or track the policy-making process, leaving the public’s initial grievances to go unaddressed.

Shaanxi

When similar grievances over heavy metal poisoning arose in the central province of Shaanxi just a few weeks after the protests in Hunan, the local government took a more proactive stance in dealing with the causes of the crisis. The government's lack of openness with the media, however, suggests that officials were more concerned with saving face than with spreading awareness of the issue that could help in other areas with similar problems.

After a parent in the city of Baoji discovered her child had serious lead poisoning during a routine check-up, medical staff at Xi'an Central Hospital gave examinations to the children of Baoji. The results were grim: more than 300 children were found to have dangerous levels of lead in their blood, with the number reaching more than 800 a week later (*Xinhua*, "Smelter to Close"). The blame was put on the nearby Shaanxi Dongling Lead and Zinc Smelting Plant, whose massive metal refining accounted for a significant portion of the county's total GDP.

Though most of the plant was shut down immediately after the lead poisoning was discovered, one section (out of five) remained in operation. Believing there was an unspoken contract between the plant and the government, infuriated parents of the hospitalized children and hundreds of supporters took to the streets. They tore down the fences of the Dongling offices, attacked their vehicles with stones and broke their desks and windows. The violence stopped when the mayor of Baoji,

Dai Zhengshe, arrived on the scene to announce that the plant would be immediately and fully closed. The mayor's office also created a health program to educate children on how to protect themselves from lead poisoning that would run in all elementary schools. Furthermore, the Provincial Environmental Protection Department created a 500,000 RMB fund for the rehabilitation of families and lands harmed by the lead pollution (*Xinhua*, "Smelter to Close").

On the surface, the Shaanxi case is a better example than the Hunan case of the government properly addressing a case of groundwater poisoning. The 600 families in Baoji were moved from their poisoned area to a clean area, the factory was closed, and there have been free health programs set up to care for those who were poisoned. But while everything else was done right, when BBC reporters came to Shaanxi to interview villagers affected by the lead pollution, they were blocked by local police, and an official told them that they could not enter the village despite their special permits from the central government (Somerville). This is a reminder that while provincial and prefectural governments are improving their responses to major disasters, and although the central government seems willing to provide a more open atmosphere for foreign media, many local governments continue to hold the view that news coverage, especially from foreign journalists, is embarrassing, dangerous and should be prevented, slowing the transition to a more transparent presentation of policymaking in China.

If the central and local governments seek to create a “harmonious” relationship with its citizens, it needs to take advantage of potentially embarrassing situations like that which took place in Baoji, using the media to inform the public of institutionalized channels through which to seek help and recourse. If the government displayed such openness with the media and public, victims of future disasters would not see protests and riots as their only recourse to justice. While the local response to the Baoji disaster was admirable from a short-term policy perspective, a more open approach to the media would have been indicative of a willingness to prevent similar problems from occurring in the future.

Conclusion

Did the protestors in the above cases achieve their aims? To a limited degree, they did. However, the purely reactive responses suggest the local governments had appeasement rather than true public welfare in mind. In the Weng’an and Shishou riots, which both took place after local governments failed to disclose information about suspicious deaths, the central government reacted by punishing local officials involved and reaffirming its commitment to greater transparency and accountability? Despite the proximity of the Weng’an riots to the Olympic Games, however, it wasn’t until after the events in Shishou that a punitive code for officials for failing to address the needs of the citizens was established. By comparison, the responses in Hunan and Shaanxi were more comprehensive, likely because

putting the blame on polluting companies rather than on the government itself is far less damaging to the Party’s reputation, and companies can be easily punished by the government. Yet for the farmers of Zhentou, who received no assistance in moving off of their polluted land, the highly reactive provincial response was still woefully inadequate.

Problems of official corruption -- excessive fees, election fraud, and pensions-- could be significantly reduced with the introduction of regulations mandating the right to access information, such as incomes of government officials, election statistics and documents, salary and contract papers. Connected to this is the idea that while an increase in government transparency cannot put a halt to all mass incidents, it would certainly help to alleviate the contentious relationship between the public and local governments that fuels protests. Based on the language by top Party officials about “making media serve the changing interests of the people,” and the increasing number of promising local experiments with transparency regulations, it seems that government officials are willing to explore the benefits stemming from varying degrees of government transparency. Whether these experiments will provide citizens with a real channel through which to voice concerns and monitor their government before social problems escalate to violence remains to be seen.



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CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR MASS INCIDENTS, 2008-2009

March 14-17, 2008

Tibet: A series of riots and demonstrations broke out in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and adjacent Tibetan-inhabited areas of the People's Republic of China.

June 26-28, 2008

Weng'an County, Guizhou Province:

Popular anger at the response of local authorities to a teenage girl's death boiled over in a riot of 10,000 people, who burned local Communist Party offices and vehicles.

July 3, 2008

Fugu County, Shaanxi Province:

A driver at a farm jumped into the Yellow River to avoid being checked for traffic violations by the police. The kin of the dead man struggled with police over the right to deal with the corpse, which attracted many spectators and evolved into a clash between villagers and the police.

July 16, 2008

Huizhou, Guangdong Province:

More than 100 people attacked police officers over the controversial death of a motorcycle driver. The driver's family members said that he was beaten to death by the security guards, but local police were told that he died from a traffic accident. Seven members of the group, which had also overturned a police wagon and raided a police station, were arrested.

July 19, 2008

Menglian, Yunnan Province:

Rubber farmers attacked police, who had been sent to arrest alleged instigators in a conflict with rubber plant managers. Forty officers were injured and eight police vehicles were burned during the conflict, and two farmers were shot dead by riot police.

September 4, 2008

Jishou, Hunan Province: 10,000 people poured into the streets of the city to call for the restitution of money taken "fraudulently" by a fundraising company.

September 4, 2008

Ningbo, Zhejiang Province: 10,000 demonstrators attacked a factory, calling for justice for a young man who, according to witnesses, was thrown from one of its windows, suffering numerous injuries.

November 7, 2008

Bao'an District, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province: More than 2,000 people assembled outside the Shiyan Traffic Police Office, protesting with a corpse in tow. They smashed objects and set off firecrackers during an evening of disturbance.

November 17, 2008

Longnan City, Gansu Province: Up to 2,000 people attacked the local Communist Party headquarters in protest over a land dispute.

November 25, 2008

Dongguan City, Guangdong Province: An event that began as a pay dispute at a southern Chinese toy factory quickly turned into a riot as laid-off workers tapped into a network of friends and unemployed laborers, who flipped over a police car, stormed into the plant and smashed office computers.

December 9, 2008

Shanghai: Over 1,000 workers staged a rare sit-in protest outside a Shanghai factory Tuesday in the latest sign of strain in China's manufacturing industry, which has been hit hard by the economic crisis. The workers were protesting because managers at the computer and telecoms equipment factory had failed to fully pay at least six months' worth of overtime, bonuses and benefits, one of the organizers said.

June 15, 2009

Nankang City, Jiangxi Province: Thousands of people gathered in front of Nankang City Hall and the furniture mall on Highway 105. People refused to disperse when the police arrived, and ten police cars were overturned.

June 17-20, 2009

Shishou County, Hubei Province: A hotel chef's strange death caused tens of thousands of people to gather and block the road. Although local police claimed Tu's death was a suicide, foul play was believed to be involved and crowds were angered by what they alleged to be cronyism, illegal drug trafficking, and lack of transparency from the city's top officials. Protesters started gathering outside the hotel Friday and clashed with the police for two days. The incident later became a mass riot involving more than 10,000 people and 10,000 police officers.

July 5-11, 2009

Xinjiang: In the outbreak of violence, prompted by an earlier riot in a factory in southern China, shops were smashed, vehicles set alight, and passers-by assailed by rioters. The violence was the worst incidence of ethnic unrest in China in decades. 197 people died and more than 1,700 were injured.

July 24, 2009

Tonghua City, Jilin Province: About 1,000 workers of Tonghua Iron and Steel Group launched a 10-hour riot after being told of possible mass layoffs. The company's general manager was beaten to death by the protesters.

July 30, 2009

Zhentou Township, Hunan Province: More than 1,000 people demonstrated outside local government headquarters and a police station, demanding greater compensation for pollution from the Xianhe Chemical Plant, which is a chemical plant that has sickened locals and poisoned surrounding farmlands. Six villagers were arrested during the protest, including one who was badly beaten by police.

August 11-15, 2009

Anyang City, Henan Province: Thousands of angry workers of The Linzhou Steel Corporation protested against the takeover of their factory by a private company.

THE NEED FOR MEDIA OPENNESS: LESSONS FROM TIBET AND XIN- JIANG

By Charlotte Milner-Barry



Despite Beijing's significant efforts to avoid manifestations of social unrest, the number of mass incidents has grown substantially in recent years. "Mass incident" is an umbrella term used by the Chinese government to label any social disturbance, from small-scale picketing to riots. The riots that took place in Tibet in March 2008 and in Xinjiang in July 2009 were the largest, longest-lasting, and most widely discussed displays of mass violence in the past decade to be categorized as "mass incidents."

However, these two cases should not be interpreted as representative of the mass incidents that regularly take place throughout the country as a response to persisting social problems, economic reforms and political corruption. The displays of unrest in the two autonomous regions were rather unique, not only in their size and scale, but also in their shared characteristics. Specifically, these shared characteristics include:

- 1) The political motivations attributed to the violence. These motivations stem

from issues of ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic nationalism, religious, cultural and historical differences between the ethnic minority population and the Han population, and a push for regional independence and/or autonomy.

- 2) The social and economic conditions of the ethnic minority populations. Both regions have ethnic populations who live in poorer economic conditions than Han migrants to the regions.
- 3) The attention paid to the riots in the international media. Due in part to the large populations of Tibetans and Uyghurs living in exile outside of China and the leadership of such charismatic individuals as the Dalai Lama and, to a lesser extent, Rebiya Kadeer, international media focus on both incidents was extensive.
- 4) A high level of sensitivity in the eyes of the Chinese government. Both incidents revolve around implicit challenges to the PRC's territorial integrity, an indisputable tenant of Chinese domestic and foreign policy that is seen as vital for the survival of the state. As such, all decision making when faced with such displays of social unrest is at the purview of the central leadership.

Tibet 3.14 Riots

In March 2008, riots took place in Tibet and parts of western China, the largest and most violent riots to take place in decades. The event was a focal point in

the Chinese and international media in the months leading up to the Beijing Olympics. The complexity of the issues involved, Beijing's decision to saturate state media with government bias in denial of this complexity, and the government's lack of openness with the media caused some western reports to be based on misinformation rather than evidence and served to compound the damage to China's international reputation.



[Protesters in Tibet]

Timeline of Events

On March 10, 2008, to mark the 49th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's exile, Tibetan monks demonstrated across the region, leading Chinese Police to intervene and imprison several monks. These riots sparked further protests within Sichuan and Gansu provinces. In neighboring countries with large Tibetan populations, such as India and Nepal, thousands of monks and Tibetan sympathizers took to the streets in support of the Tibetan protests. On March 11, ethnic Tibetans continued to rally in honor of those who had been detained in the past and on the first day of protests.

On Friday, March 13, Chinese security forces closed off important monasteries within the capital of Tibet, Lhasa. The picketing soon escalated into violence when friction surfaced between the police, who were predominantly Han, and the Tibetan protesters. Ethnic Tibetans clashed with the Chinese security forces. Angry Tibetans turned on Chinese-owned property by burning restaurants, homes, and police property.

The rioting in Lhasa reached a climax on Saturday, March 14. The violence continued along with the looting, burning and ethnic clashes between Han Chinese and Tibetans. By this point Chinese security forces appeared as a stabilizing presence by intervening and helping to maintain order. Police roped off several locations within the city center and limited public access to others.¹

Beijing's Media response

During the riots several people were killed and severely injured; the *New York Times* cited state media reports that at least 10 people had died, Lhasa was under a curfew, and police had blocked main city thoroughfares.² By Sunday, March 15, Chinese security forces began imposing constraints on foreigners who were already within or planned to enter Tibet and coercing tourists to leave the region. An agent at China Youth Travel Agency in Lhasa was quoted as saying, "All foreign people are forbidden to go to Tibet now. But Chinese

people are free to go."³ Within the next three days, the majority of foreign tourists and journalists had left the province. According to the BBC, a German journalist forced out of Lhasa on March 18 noted that Chinese security forces had mentioned that he was the last foreign journalist in the city.⁴ The same day, the *Hong Kong Standard* reported that over a dozen Hong Kong journalists were required to leave Tibet. The Hong Kong Journalist's Association cited the reason given by Chinese authorities as to why journalists were forced to leave was that they had been accused of illegal reporting.⁵

By March 14, the government was blocking foreign websites and censoring foreign television broadcasts about Tibet.

By March 14, it appeared that the government was blocking foreign websites within China and censoring foreign television broadcasts about Tibet. YouTube and Facebook were blocked while other websites were blocked intermittently. CNN and

BBC broadcasts regarding the Tibetan riots had patchy reception.⁶ Foreign journalists who had been barred from Tibet reported on the riots from within neighboring provinces. Foreigners who were in Tibet at the time of the riots were forced to leave immediately.⁷ However, the Chinese state media were allowed to report from Tibet and neighboring areas where the riots had occurred.

In the aftermath of the riots, on March 25, the Xinhua news agency ran a question-and-answer piece regarding unaddressed

or unclear events that occurred during the Tibet riots. The article states that eighteen civilians and one police officer were killed while 623 people, including 241 police and armed police, were injured. The article goes on to give an estimation of the damage costs and fatalities from each region where the protests occurred. The article also covers the exact origins of the riots, claiming, "The monks were invective and aggressive, and confronted with the security forces. In the Sera Monastery, ten monks held up flags of the so-called Tibetan exile government and shouted "Tibetan independence." 8 The varying accounts of the number of deaths, the debate over which party is to be held accountable, and the origins of the riots make it difficult to draw any concrete conclusions. *Time Magazine* reported that twenty-two people died, while the BBC cited the Tibetan exiles' claim of at least ninety-nine fatalities, including eighty in Lhasa.9 Reuters quotes the Tibetan government in exile as having said eighty people died, while Tibetan officials put the total death toll at thirteen.10 As foreign media had been expelled early on, and denied access to information, it is difficult to verify which claims are accurate.

The Chinese government's official response was to hold "overseas forces," such as the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, accountable. The Xinhua news agency reiterated the government's stance when it argued that there

was evidence that the riots had been "organized, premeditated and masterminded" by the government in exile.11 Xinhua called Dharamsala, a city in northern India where the Tibetan government in exile resides, an "epicenter of lies."12 China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang, quoted in *Time Magazine*, blamed the protests on "a political conspiracy schemed by the Dalai group, aiming to separate Tibet from China and to destroy the normal, harmonious and peaceful life of the Tibetan people."13 Chinese authorities rallied national support through state media, which promoted the party line.

...at the same time, this lack of international access led to rumors and misinformation both domestically and abroad

The primary motivations of Chinese authorities were keen to curb violence quickly, regain stability, and restrict foreign coverage so as not to bring attention to an unsavory incident so shortly before the Olympics were due to begin in Beijing. But, at the same time, this lack of international access led to rumors and misinformation both domestically and abroad. Chinese netizens were very critical of the western media reports on the Tibetan riots. Some of these reports were supported by falsified rumors; other newspapers that have been traditionally sympathetic to the Tibetan cause carried some very biased reporting. In an article in the *New York Times*, Gao Zhikai, a former official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was quoted as saying that western media were partly to blame for the misinformation surrounding the inci-

dent: “If you read the foreign media, the only message you can get is that China is very heavy-handed, and they are doing a lot of bad things in Tibet, and they are totally out of their minds...and [the foreign media] talk about the Dalai Lama as if he’s God.”¹⁴

The intervention and response to the Tibetan riots was not an unusual way for Beijing to deal with mass incidents. During the initial protests on March 10, many

Since the Tibetan riots, it has remained difficult for journalists and tourists to travel freely in Tibet

protesters were rounded up and arrested simply for picketing. Within the next two days monasteries had been shut down to prevent large gatherings. Despite these precautions, when the protests turned violent, Chinese security forces were on the scene within hours and enforced a curfew within the city. Four days after the initial protests, as the rioting reached its ze-

nith, several main thoroughfares were blocked. By the fifth day foreigners were told to leave and others barred from even entering Tibet. The large military presence and heavy-handed approach towards protesters were not anything out of the ordinary. Neither was Beijing’s reaction towards international media.

Beijing’s closed-off and restrictive approach to information management and uniformed response over who was to be held accountable for the riots revealed a relatively outdated public relations apparatus for dealing with sensitive issues. Chi-

na’s global image was negatively impacted as a result. The government’s instinctual response was to shy away from global attention on the issue, leaving the Tibetan exiles in the international lime light, able to frame the story from their own point of view. Beijing’s unwillingness to be transparent to the public and the media was a major factor in the Tibetan-led narrative’s monopolization of the international coverage of the riots. Since the Tibetan riots, it has remained difficult for journalists and tourists to travel freely in Tibet, which perpetuates western sympathy and the belief that Tibetans have been treated unfairly. Because Beijing waited 11 days to release official facts and figures from the riots, international media used primarily Tibetan accounts as their primary source of information. The resulting bias toward the Tibetan account of events helped to fuel misunderstanding and animosity toward the Chinese government in the international community.

Xinjiang Riots

About a year after the Tibetan riots, another riot fueled by ethnic nationalism occurred, this time eliciting a significantly different media approach by top leadership. Beijing’s response to the large-scale riots in Xinjiang this September was notably different from how it handled information in the aftermath of the Tibetan riots.

Background: Shaoguan Factory Brawl

On Friday, June 26, 2009, at a toy factory in Guangdong, a fight erupted. There are

varying descriptions as to how the fight started, but Chinese officials characterize it as a “mass brawl.”¹⁵ The next day a Hong Kong newspaper carried the story (a day earlier than the mainland official newspaper), citing ethnic tensions as a possible reason for the brawl. “Some people carrying metal pipes entered a dormitory to attack Uighur workers. The Uighurs fought back with knives, leading to a fierce brawl involving hundreds,” Hong Kong’s *Ming Pao* stated.¹⁶

Two days after the brawl, Chinese state media reported that a brawl had got out of control, in a factory in Southern China, injuring 118, killing two and requiring 400 police to control the situation. Overall this quiet piece of journalism was not an eye catcher. Riots among factory workers are not an uncommon occurrence. The article mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that the factory employed migrant laborers from Xinjiang. Although no direct link was made, it seemed the author was alluding to the fact that the brawl may have had something to do with tensions between Xinjiang and Han factory workers. An unknown municipal government spokesperson was quoted in the article as saying, “all the 118 injured were in stable condition, 60 of whom remain hospitalized.”¹⁷

After the brawl had been quelled, the other 700 Xinjiang workers were transferred to another factory for safety precautions. There has been speculation that they are still being held and many have been unable to return home. For more than a week

after the mass brawl, the only official arrest was of Zhu Gangyuan, the man accused of spreading the internet rumors.¹⁸ Ten days after the mass brawl, Shaoguan police announced that they had detained people suspected of being involved with the killings of the Uighur migrants.¹⁹



[Buses burned by protesters]

Timeline of Events: July riots in Urumqi

On July 5, a group of several hundred people gathered in Urumqi city’s center to air grievances regarding the June deaths of the two Uighers from the Shaoguan Toy factory. As the march continued into a large shopping area, it escalated into a violent clash between the Uighers, the Han Chinese, and the police.

On July 7, mobs of Han Chinese took to the streets looking for vengeance for the Han Chinese who had been killed in the riot two days previously. Marauding mobs were caught in scuffles, and fights continued to break out throughout the day. Police used tear gas to disperse and manage the crowds.²⁰

By July 8, the rioting had come to an end. Paramilitary troops had arrived in the city

and a curfew was imposed. However, there was still an atmosphere of anxiety, fear and anger amongst the population. Some of this was directed towards the government and its handling of the recent events. In the aftermath of the riots, crowds demanded the resignation of Wang Lequan, the CCP party secretary in Xinjiang. Wang Lequan has since kept his job, but the Urumqi party secretary was fired, as was the provincial police chief.²¹



[Han Chinese protesting in Urumqi]

Beijing's media response

Beijing's media response in dealing with the Xinjiang riots was a combination of unusually open access for foreign media outlets and the more familiar practice of closing off the affected areas. As soon as word of the violence reached the capital, internet access to the entire province was cut off. According to the *Economist* it was "the first time such a wide outage has been reported anywhere in China, even during the unrest in Tibet." International telephone calls were blocked, and by the next day, local phone and text messaging services had been disrupted. However, at the hotel designated for the international

media, some media devices were accessible.²²

Despite the fact that the violence was over, mosques were closed on July 10 "for public safety".²³ However, such large crowds arrived at the mosques to pray that Chinese police had to concede and open two of them.

As during the riots in Tibet, Chinese officials were quick to blame the unrest on elements outside of the country, accusing the World Uighur Congress (WUC) of being the main instigator. Although no evidence was offered, the WUC was accused of having "masterminded", "instigated" and "controlled" the unrest.²⁴ On July 8, Chinese President Hu Jintao abruptly left the G8 conference in Italy to attend to the emergency in Urumqi.²⁵ Upon his return, Hu organized an emergency meeting of the Politburo. At the end of their meeting the statement that was issued did not stray far from the earlier government claims that the social unrest was due to "anti-China forces offshore."²⁶

However, in an unusual move for a government that prefers tight control over media coverage, foreign and domestic media were allowed and even encouraged to travel to Urumqi in the week after the riots. The government was also unusually quick to provide casualty figures and allow journalists to interview whom they wished, with supervision. In addition, local and state media were permitted to publish images of the riots, though pictures and further in-depth analysis of the violence

against Uighurs in the Shaoguan toy factory remains off-limits to the media.²⁷ In general, due to the more open approach towards media, the coverage of the Xinjiang riots was considered to be more accurate and balanced.

Analysis

By comparing the aftermath of these two mass incidents, we can observe that the Chinese government has indeed made policy changes concerning mass incidents. The Xinjiang riots have exposed recent changes to Beijing's approach to information management during crises. The government took a few days before responding publically to the Tibetan riots. Although the military and security forces were quick to respond, foreign tourists and journalists were forced to leave five days after the riots began, and others were barred from entering, leaving foreign media in the dark. However the government's public response to the events in Xinjiang was more rapid. As soon as the most violent rioting was over, a number of foreign journalists were invited into the region to report on the rioting and the aftermath. In Tibet, places of worship were under strict monitoring and in some cases closed down; the majority of mosques in Xinjiang remained open due to public pressure. The official figures regarding fatalities and injuries were released relatively quickly in both cases; however the figures in Xinjiang

were more reliable as international media were better able to conduct independent fact checks.

The Tibet riots exposed where China's policy makers had failed. The Chinese government needed to take a fresh approach towards foreign media outlets instead of treating them like pariahs. Primarily because the Tibetan riots were closed to the international media, speculation, and in some cases false statements, landed on the front pages of prestigious media outlets such as CCN, the BBC and *Die*

...the two riots demonstrate the changing attitude of Beijing towards the transparency of mass incidents.

Zeit. These misrepresentations only fueled anger and outrage in China towards the Western coverage of events. After the Tibetan riots, Chinese citizens and netizens vehemently chastised the bias of Western media coverage.

When compared, the two riots demonstrate the changing attitude of Beijing towards the transparency of mass incidents. In the aftermath of the Tibetan riots, international media centered as much on China's suppression of information as on the ethnic Tibetan violence against the Han Chinese. Speaking at the October 2009 World Media Summit, the President of Turner Broadcasting best sums up how the absence of transparency can in itself become the story for international media outlets: "When our news professionals are not able to report objectively on the scene, then second-hand information, unverifi-

ble reports, speculation, rumors, misinformation and disinformation will rapidly spread across internet and phone lines. They, and not the facts, will take over and become "the story".²⁸

This message was reinforced by the positive international response garnered by the government's open response to the media in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. Within few hours after the disaster hit, the state media released the relevant facts and figures, which continued to be updated throughout the aftermath. The speed and transparency of reporting was unprecedented, and came as a contrast to the aftermath of the Tibetan media coverage. Internationally, Beijing's media openness and willingness to release information became in itself a major story. The decline in China's image following its response to the Tibetan riots, combined with more positive international reaction following the Sichuan earthquake, may have contributed to its open media response in Xinjiang.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Xinjiang riots, Beijing displayed a considerable amount of media savvy in increasing transparency to an international public interested in Chinese human rights issues, while at the same time locking down information into and within the region in order to contain the violence. Taken within the context of the rhetoric of the central government in the last several years, this openness falls within the government's larger media strategy. In the past few years, Beijing has

been opening up towards foreign and new media. In January 2007, China issued a regulation for the Olympics, which gave foreign journalists unprecedented freedom to conduct interviews. The regulation was annulled after the Olympics finished; however, more liberal press regulations have been passed in its place.

Recent indicators suggest that Beijing was pleased with the international reception of its new media response and that it intends to pursue similar media tactics in the future. In October 2009, Beijing held the first "World Media Summit." Hu Jintao gave the opening speech, in which he argued that news organizations had an altruistic obligation to help maintain peace first and foremost and vowed future openness between the government and foreign media.²⁹

It is imperative, however, to remember that despite Beijing's increasingly open attitude toward the foreign media, members of the domestic media and the public are not necessarily granted the same freedoms. Xinjiang-based journalist and blogger recently reported that as of late October, internet access had yet to be restored to the general public in Xinjiang.³⁰ In terms of media response, however, Beijing is willing to be slightly more flexible on issues such as freedom of information and government transparency to avoid further large-scale and violent riots and promote a more positive global image.



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Comparing Government Response

Xinjiang	Tibet
<p>July 6th</p> <p>Local official issues statement. Invitations sent to foreign media to come and cover the riots.</p>	<p>March 14th</p> <p>Riots escalate; Chinese police force arrives.</p>
<p>July 9th</p> <p>Emergency politburo meeting issues statement.</p>	<p>March 17th</p> <p>No government response. Tibet governor says death toll is 16.</p>
<p>July 7th</p> <p>Government arranges hotel for International media where Internet works.</p>	<p>March 15th</p> <p>Chinese authorities forbid foreigners from entering Tibet and coerce journalists to leave.</p>
<p>July 10th</p> <p>Government facts and figures released.</p>	<p>March 18th</p> <p>Last foreign journalist leaves Lhasa. Government facts not released until March 25th.</p>
<p>July 8th</p> <p>Hu Jintao flies back to Beijing to deal with Xinjiang emergency.</p>	<p>March 16th</p> <p>Riots quite down, Local government "capable of ensuring stability".</p>

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“TEACH A MAN HOW TO FISH”: THE SOLUTION TO MASS INCIDENTS

By Yu Liu, translated by Kai Zhou



[About the author: Dr. Yu Liu is a lecturer at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include Chinese revolution, political economy of post-communist transition, comparative democratization and globalization. Dr. Yu Liu received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 2006.]

"Mass incidents" have become an increasingly hot topic in China. From the beginning of this year, we have witnessed the Suqian demolition incident in Jiangsu Province, the Shishou riot in Hubei Province, and the Tong Gang incident in Jilin Province. Indeed, mass incidents are occurring one after another as social tensions continue to rise.

Mass incidents are not necessarily a bad thing. The public has demands to make and needs to express those demands. This is a very common phenomenon for a modern society and can even be considered a positive sign of the awakening awareness of civic rights. If we look at the world around us, we can see that mass incidents are unavoidable in an open society. For instance, in April of this year,

there was a massive demonstration during the G20 summit in London, which was a mass incident with tens of thousands of people involved. The French people are also loyal fans of mass incidents. Strikes, protests and demonstrations happen all the time. Mass incidents have almost become a regular feature of French culture. During a visit to France this March, I arrived just in time to find that the Versailles palace staff were on strike and we couldn't go in, meaning that my long journey had been in vain.

For this reason, there is no need to turn pale when mass incidents are discussed. As long as mass incidents are peaceful, they are just a way to express the demands of the public, such as in the taxi drivers' strike in Chongqing, or the private school teachers' petition in Zhengzhou. Just as a person needs a variety of bodily symptoms in order to assess her health, and thus adjust her diet and daily routine accordingly, governments also require that the public constantly update them with "symptoms," so that they can adjust policies accordingly. The occurrence of a mass incident is one of those symptoms.

However, the frequency, intensity and violence of recent mass incidents have led observers to worry about the extent to which these incidents involved citizens seeking dialogue, and the extent to which they involved people seeking merely to vent their anger.

One must understand that the public has never been monolithic. There are moderates and radicals—the former seeks a

way to express appeals and solve problems through dialogue, while the latter hides within collective violence to vent private anger. A good institutional arrangement is to release pressure by listening to the rational voices in society, so that the voices of violence will lose their legitimacy to peaceful dialogue.

How could we make this happen? An old saying comes to my mind: rather than give a man fish, it's better to teach him to fish.

How do our local officials handle mass incidents right now? Basically, there are two courses of action: one is to cover up the truth, and the other is to comfort the public. In order to cover up, some places bar journalists when mass incidents happen; other places come up with a slogan—"It is illegal to bypass local authorities for petitions." Even more ridiculous, a local government sent police to Beijing to arrest journalists. Of course, to comfort the public is more civilized than to cover up the facts. For instance, local leaders were fired from their posts after the Weng'an Incident in Guizhou and the Shishou Incident in Hubei. Also, the local government dispatched the environmental department to conduct water quality surveys when a mass incident occurred in Dongming, Shandong Province. The Chongqing municipal government initiated an investigation of the taxi industry after the drivers' strike took place.

A long-term solution would allow people to establish institutionalized mechanisms through civil society organizations.

These reassuring measures are necessary, but unsustainable and temporary. If we were being picky, they are like "giving fish to people" - a short-term solution for a larger problem. To prevent violent mass incidents from occurring repeatedly, we must teach the people how to fish. A long-term solution would allow people to establish institutionalized mechanisms through civil society organizations to engage in dialogues with the government.

Clearly, the existence of two sides is a prerequisite for any dialogue. In the case of mass incidents, one side is the government, but who should be the other side? Unfortunately, in past large-scale, violent mass incidents, we can only see a mass of

people on "the other side." They are often nameless, without organization or discipline, and either rush into mass action or disperse into thin air.

It could be said that a lack of civil society organizations results in the potential endangerment of dialogue, leading to irrational behavior during mass incidents. If a society had a large number of civil society organizations, governments could build a sustainable platform upon which to engage in dialogue with the public to help detect and solve problems efficiently. Equally important, civil society organizations would seek to restrain the irrational and extremist behavior of their members, in order to protect their own reputations

and future development. As we all know, people tend to be reckless only when they can “disappear,” which could lead to many tragedies of murder and arson. For this reason, governments should be tolerant and open to rational civic organizations, because they could not only serve as a channel between governments and the people to communicate “symptoms” of social problems promptly and effectively, but also as a mechanism to soften and moderate the many voices in society.

In fact, neither the government nor the public wants to be caught in the same endless cycle of social unrest. The emergence of large-scale mass incidents is due in large part to the lack of mechanisms for institutional dialogue, resulting in irrational and non-institutional expression. Rather than giving people fish by taking a variety of temporary comfort measures after incidents have taken place, governments should adopt the strategy of teaching the people to fish – to be tolerant of civil society organizations and let people engage in sustainable dialogue with government through their own representatives. If that happens, all problems and conflicts could be solved by continued interactions between governments and organizations. If we define “fish” as interests, then “fishing” can be interpreted as rights. The demands of each interest cannot be satisfied without the guaranteed protection of rights. A meal today from the food bank does not ensure you will have a meal tomorrow.



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